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Research Summary

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WHAT TO DO WITH LOW RISK OFFENDERS?

Question: Do low risk offenders need treatment?

Background: Criminal offenders vary in their risk to re-offend. Objective measures have been developed to assess this risk, helping criminal justice staff identify offenders who differ in their levels of risk. Today, most criminal justice agencies routinely use offender risk assessment instruments to differentiate higher risk offenders from lower risk offenders.

Information about an offender's risk to re-offend is used for a number of purposes but two are paramount. First, risk assessment is used to enhance public safety. For example, higher risk offenders may be more likely to placed in prison or subjected to close supervision if they are on probation or parole. On the other hand, low risk offenders are more likely to have a community sentence, and when supervised in the community, they are watched less closely than the high risk offenders.

Second, offender risk information may be used to direct treatment services to those offenders who need it the most (i.e., the higher risk offender; see Research Summary Vol. 5, No. 5). Given this, the question becomes, should treatment also be provided to low risk offenders and if so, how much and what type of treatment is most appropriate?

Method: A quantitative review of the offender rehabilitation literature was conducted. Studies were included that compared offenders who received treatment to those who did not and that reported the rates of recidivism at follow-up. The review identified 273 tests of the effects of treatment on recidivism. As part of the review, the offenders in the studies were categorized into a low and high risk group. In this way, the effectiveness of treatment could be analyzed according to offender risk level.

Answer: The review of the literature highlighted three important findings. First, providing treatment to offenders was associated with reduced recidivism. On average, the recidivism rate was 12 percentage points lower for the treated offenders compared to the non-treated offenders.

Second, when only risk level is considered, treating high risk offenders resulted in an 11% reduction in recidivism but only 3% for low risk offenders. However, larger reductions in recidivism were found when other factors such as treatment goals and method of intervention were considered. Generally, low risk offenders have fewer problems that require intervention and they have more personal strengths compared to high risk offenders.

Third, there were instances in the literature of treatment actually *increasing* the

probability of recidivism of low risk offenders. For example, in one study, the recidivism rate of low risk offenders increased by 17%. However, most of the studies that did show poor outcomes with low risk offenders reported increases between 5% and 7%.

Overall, it was apparent from the review that treatment can be effective but that the effectiveness of treatment varies with the risk level of the offenders.

Policy Implications:

1. Treatment services provided to low risk offenders should be kept to a minimum. Providing intensive treatment to low risk offenders is not only an inefficient use of resources but it may even increase their chances of re-offending.
2. If treatment is provided to low risk offenders then steps should be taken to ensure that the low risk offenders are separated as much as possible from high risk offenders. Mixing low risk offenders with higher risk offenders in a treatment program runs the risk of exposing low risk offenders to the influence of high risk offenders.
3. Low risk offenders have more personal strengths and few treatment needs compared to high risk offenders. Often, the treatment needs of low risk offenders are only weakly associated with their criminal behavior. These needs are noncriminogenic needs (e.g., anxiety, depression and general feelings of distress). Referral to non-criminal justice agencies for services to address their noncriminogenic needs would provide the human services sufficient for these low risk offenders and at the same time separate them from high risk offenders.

Source: Andrews, D. A. & Bonta, J. (2006). *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct* (4th ed.). Newark, NJ: LexisNexis.

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